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ABSTRACT

The cultural production of the free markets has surpassed the commissions of all the monarchs and popes put together. Because the production of art, artifice, and criticism has become so vast and various, almost any hypothesis can be posed about culture--no matter how absurd one's speculation may be--and countless supporting examples and arguments can be found to prove one's view is true. Since the 1980s, criticisms of writing workshops and programs have become an occasional feature in glossy magazines, newspapers, literary magazines, academic journals, and books of literary criticism. In both the national and local commentary on writing programs, the misrepresentations can be lurid. This paper has a few different components: an examination of the commentary on writing programs; a response to two recent indictments (one of which was published by the Modern Language Association); a brief history of creative writing as an academic discipline; a catalog of the benefits of writing programs to colleges and universities and to the culture in general; and a few personal confessions. (NKA)

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Creative Writing & Its Discontents.

D. W. Fenza

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March/April 2000

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Creative Writing & its Discontents

by D.W. Fenza

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Since the 1980s, criticisms of writing workshops and programs have become an occasional feature in glossy magazines, newspapers, literary magazines, academic journals, and books of literary criticism. Meanwhile, in the fiefdoms of academe, literary scholars, theorists, and writers often compete for the same awards, grants, endowed chairs, and budget lines; and that competition compels each camp to trivialize the other. In both the national and local commentary on writing programs, the misrepresentations can be lurid.

An apology for the profession of writers who teach, this polemic has a few different components: an examination of the commentary on writing programs; a response to two recent indictments (one of which was published by the Modern Language Association); a brief history of creative writing as an academic discipline; a catalog of the benefits of writing programs to colleges and universities and to our culture in general; and, finally, a few personal confessions.

1. How to Become a Cultural Pundit

This spring, hundreds of art exhibits will open and close throughout North America. Over one hundred new "major motion pictures" will be released to the multiplexes in this one season. Thousands of television shows will be broadcast, and thousands of new CDs will be recorded and sold. The Presidency and Congress will continue to script themselves like made-for-TV dramas.

The cultural production of the free markets has surpassed the commissions of all the monarchs and popes put together. Because the production of art, artifice, and criticism has become so vast and various, you can pose almost any hypothesis about our culture—no matter how absurd your speculation may be—and find countless supporting examples and arguments to prove your view is true. This is a fantastic time to work as a cultural commentator.

Regardless of the argument you choose to make, it is easy to spin your commentary either to the political right or left, but you should take special care with the tone and angle of your piece. An analytical and wry tone tempered with concern usually works well. For your angle, it is always more newsworthy to prove your subject's relation to some terrible debacle, demise, death, or degeneracy. Good news seldom merits publication, unless it

involves staggering sums of money. If you can work the mention of huge sums of money into bad news, however, that is the most newsworthy of all, especially if it involves public institutions and the taxpayer's dollars.

You can explain, for instance, that a conservative backlash in contemporary art has betrayed the promise of abstract expressionism, and this neo-conservative mainstream has coerced museums and galleries to regress to the old, boring, aristocratic platitudes of representational painting; and you can refer, as proof, to the overstuffed nudes of Fernando Botero, the narrative paintings of Mark Tansey, the still life paintings of William Bailey, the photographic realist of your choice, and all the safe and predictable retrospectives mounted in the last five years by major museums to feature artists like Cassatt, Vermeer, Whistler, and Ingres. You can garnish your argument with quotes of John Berger, Walter Benjamin, and Rosalind Krauss; and you can mention the ridiculous prices paid for these paintings and the expense of showing them. "The Death of Abstract Expressionism" would be a provocative title for your piece.

Or, you can prove that contemporary art has been subjected to the tyranny of narcissists obsessed with bodily functions and sacrilege. You can describe Matthew Barney's "Cremaster" series of "self-lubricating" self-portraits; Jeff Koons' blown-glass sculpture of himself copulating with an Italian porn star; Karen Finley's chocolate-smeared monologues; Robert Mapplethorpe's portrayal of himself as a devil, wearing a bullwhip as a demonic suppository and tail; Andres Serrano's rainbows of semen; Cindy Sherman's cinematic self-portraits; and all the works at the "Sensation" show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Here, too, you should refer to the price paid for acquiring these works, and you can refer to the writings on Hilton Kramer, Robert Hughes, and others for support in your outrage. For this critique, "The Rape of Beauty" might be an appropriate title.

Whichever of these two arguments you choose, you should also satirize the cultural institutions and their "elitist" leadership and explain how they are disconnected from the general public.

You don't need to conduct exhaustive research since your own casual perusals, personal experiences, and second-hand reports can supply you with ready information. If you work for a major media outlet, you can easily search the databases of past newspapers and magazines and find a few quotes and angles to make your piece seem lively and authoritative. The range of your references will make you seem cosmopolitan, erudite, and wise. You may even appear heroic—the rebel! the outsider!—for daring to challenge the massive threats to the well-being of art, social equity, morality, or whatever your agenda happens to be. The fidelity of your point of view, however, is less important than the drama of your stance and the timeliness with which you whirl into it. Spin your subject first, and you will gain notoriety as your successors will quote you. It is thrilling and rewarding work, even when you mistake a microcosm for the world at large.

2. The Nature of Commentary on Writing Workshops

Like the other arts and their institutions, literature and universities have suffered the interest of cultural commentators. Each year in the U.S., more than 800 titles of poetry are published, along with thousands of titles of fiction and thousands of titles of nonfiction. Bookstores, literary centers, and universities sponsor thousands of readings, and the conferences and programs of the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) offer countless workshops for writers. Bewildered by the vast maze of our culture, we turn to our commentators for a clear overview. It's all too big to really seem *yours, mine,* or *ours.*

Estranging times whet our appetites for strange insights, and soon, bizarre conclusions seem matter-of-fact. Poetry is dead, according to Joseph Epstein in "Who Killed Poetry?" in *Commentary* magazine. Our fiction writers are sleeping and lack a social conscience, according to a feature story of *Esquire* magazine. Poetry no longer matters as it remains sequestered within a subculture, according to Dana Gioia in his book *Can Poetry Matter?* Most of our younger fiction writers produce works in the same mechanical style, according to John W. Aldridge in his book *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly Line Fiction.* Creative writing is a crass, exploitative industry, they argue. Poetry workshops are lazy exercises in self-indulgence and group therapy, according to Thomas M. Disch in "The Castle of Indolence" in *The Hudson Review.* Our nonfiction writers are confessional exhibitionists, according to *Vanity Fair.* Our younger poets all write in the same confessional, Midwestern, middlebrow, middle-of-the-road, "Iowa" lyrical style, according to Andrei Codrescu, Charles Bernstein, and many poet-critic-editors who also happen to be promoting their own presses, books, anthologies, journals, or schools of poetry. They blame creative writing programs, at least partly, for whatever adversely influences contemporary letters or the sales of their books and journals.

In 1982, Donald Hall gave a keynote address in Boston at the Annual Conference of the AWP. His discussion of poetry and ambition challenged what he thought to be facile and specious in creative writing programs and contemporary poetry. Seriously interested in improving the place of writing in our culture and in academe, AWP took Hall's remarks seriously and, a few years later, would publish Hall's essay, "Poetry and Ambition," which evolved from his address. In the same spirit in 1989, AWP reprinted "Who Killed Poetry?" by Joseph Epstein. We hoped, too, that our membership would muster a collective rebuttal to disarm our detractors. The responses from our readers filled many issues of our journal, some of which were quoted and reprinted in subsequent books.

Unfortunately, when detractors of writing programs grow weary of their own arguments, others are happy to take their place. During the past few years, when journalists called the offices of AWP, most had read, via their online databases, Dana Gioia's piece or similar arguments. The first thing the journalists wanted to know, usually, were the total numbers of creative writing programs, as if there were something scandalous in their numbers alone. Since there are roughly 1,500 colleges and universities in the U.S., the journalists expect to expose a major conspiracy.

Sometimes, a critic is eager to blame a clumsy first novel or a bad book of poems on the rise of MFA programs. Literature may be special in this peculiar way. After going to see a predictable play, a derivative painting, a dull ballet, or a bad movie, you seldom hear, in the lobbies, complaints about "all those goddamn MFA programs" in film, dance, art, or theater, although those graduate schools are far more numerous than writing programs. In professional sports, you don't hear the fans reviling the alma mater of a wide receiver because he dropped a pass. In literature, though, bashing creative writing programs seems reasonable. In reviewing a book for *The Washington Post*, the critic Jonathan Yardley once went out of his way to mention that the book's author, Norman Rush, was "a real writer," and not some "callow" product of a creative writing program.

Like any profession, the teaching of writing has its faults, and some of the criticism rises because it has some merit some of the time, in a few classes, at a few institutions, among a few writers; but the ferocity of the criticisms, their frequency, and the willingness of their authors to use anecdotal examples to misrepresent an entire profession is bewildering. Sometimes the criticism comes from AWP's own teachers and graduates.

Why do the misrepresentations like those found in "Who Killed Poetry?" or *The New Assembly Line Fiction* enjoy regular recycling into new permutations? The reasons make for an interesting list. By way of summary and segue, here are a few:

• In matters of literature, like any art, there are few verifiable statistics on currents of popular influence, interest, and taste. Your word on the topic, in such a subjective realm, can gain wide currency if it is stamped in memorable rhetoric and buffed by supporting examples, quotes, and arguments.

• Because our culture produces so many books by so many writers for so many different audiences, an editor's job has become hell. With so many books published each year, it is hard, perhaps impossible, to become an important gatekeeper or major arbiter of taste. Those at the broken gates feel compelled to blame someone or some institution for their declining powers.

• Our democratic ideals, especially when it comes to literature, have not been reconciled with our preference for excellence—whether that preference be elitist or merely consumerist—our desire to enjoy the best and discard the rest. If we see a local, little theater production of a play, we may be charmed by it, even if it wobbles and sags a bit, because it's homegrown and ours. It doesn't appear to be a threat to the well-being of Broadway and national theater. Nor does a poorly officiated, strangely played game of football on a suburban lawn with 12-year-olds portend the demise of professional sports. But if we hear bad poetry at a poetry slam, it's likely to be yet another sign of poetry's pandemic demise by too much over-encouragement of too many students by too many schools.

• Our culture has become so vast and various that it estranges us. In the anxiety of affluence, we need guides who will simplify our culture, and most punditry promises to do this. In the will to simplify, to give power back to the gatekeepers, it's often

compelling to attack institutions, like the National Endowment for the Arts, universities, museums, or galleries, which only continue to enlarge and complicate our culture.

• There is a market for such facile cultural commentary in popular, literary, and scholarly periodicals and in books of literary criticism.

• Writing programs are convenient windmills to joust against. It's often advantageous for a writer to strike a heroic pose, even if it is, in the end, only quixotic—*Me alone against the hegemony of popular opinion! I'm the original and everyone else is the duplication!* The rebellion of the vanguard has become automatic and, ironically, mainstream; it is the undertow of every other advertising campaign and popular song. If there are no enemies, we must invent some. For a few writers and artists, it's as reflexive as the grasping of fashion accessories in Soho.

• It is an extremely challenging time to be a serious literary writer because the variety of our entertainments continue to grow and new arts and diversions threaten to displace the old. Some writers feel compelled to launch campaigns of artistic cleansing.

• Writers believe in their work and wish to clear the stage and spotlight themselves and their confederates. Casting aspersions upon every writer who ever taught or studied writing in a university—except for yourself—is an effective way to do this.

• Literature, like all the other arts, is a vortex of great pleasure and great bitterness. Although those who aspire to become great painters, actors, sculptors, directors, and dancers are disappointed as frequently as writers, writers are more likely to publish their disappointments and to blame the powers that be.

• Writing programs must be modest about their artistic successes, even while critics blame the programs for artistic failures. Literary successes belong, in the end, not to teachers, not to programs, but to the writers who produced good work. Consider, for example, a writer such as Charles Baxter, who writes a brilliant first novel like *First Light*, stunning in its psychological insights and formal inventiveness. (The entire novel moves, chapter by chapter, in a reverse-chronology that nonetheless creates increasing interest in the characters—not *what will they do next?*—but *what did they do the year before*?!) Baxter's accomplishment has little to do with who his teachers were or where he went to school. Baxter willed that work into being; he deserves the credit. His education and his teachers only facilitated the growth of his talents. It would be unseemly for a teacher or program to claim to have produced this author, even if they did help in some way. That help, however, is useless, without the writer's own discipline, sacrifices, and habits of being. If your program had the good fortune to graduate a number of successful writers, you can only claim, as John Engle did many times, that you gave those writers the place and community to test their talents and sharpen their wits a bit more quickly. If your program graduates a few bad writers, however, you will be held directly responsible.

• All of us who work or study in creative writing programs cannot help but to be chronically ambivalent about our programs because their goals are so difficult and there

are an infinite number of ways to pursue them: the education of artists and the making of art. Failure is an undeniable part of the process. We can't help but to gripe about some methods and their practitioners. This is really a good sign of a profession and artistic talents moving forward, but each of us often feels alone in our dissatisfactions.

• Writers can, and should, take pride in themselves as authors and original thinkers, and occasionally, they will do so at the expense of their teachers and peers. Writers can become a bit squirrel-like if you try to uncover their influences; they will often twitch and fidget until those influences are buried again. A writer, like John Irving, who publicly acknowledges that workshops were helpful to him, is a rarity. Writers often need to conceal or trivialize their influences to feel free and empowered to make the next work. The more charismatic and effective a creative writing teacher is, the more likely he or she will be the subject of an unfinished familial drama in a young writer's coming of age.

• Scholars, literary theorists, and writers are not compatible in their endeavors or temperaments, and they, necessarily, will be compelled to criticize one another to protect and promote what they believe to be crucial to the enjoyment of literature and its future.

• Few writers in the academy know the long history of their own profession as teachers of writing. As a result, they sometimes find it hard to defend their work against the scholars, theorists, and commentators who trivialize it.

3. Les Misérables: More Vanguard Than Thou

A few of the best ploys of cultural commentary can be found in *Poetic Culture: Comtemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution* by Christopher Beach (Northwestern University Press, 1999). For those who love poetry, the book contains an interesting chapter called "Discussing the Death of Poetry to Death," in which Beach seeks to subvert the debate on the state of the art toward a promotion of the "experimental," "avant-garde," "performance," and "Language" poets. Rounding up Epstein, Gioia, and many familiar detractors of writing programs, the book illustrates the ingenious convolutions through which a literary theorist will turn his reasoning in order to claim the moral high ground of "outsider" status for himself and his favorite writers. Since many of the poets and critics whom Beach advocates are also dependent upon universities for whatever currency they have in our general culture, Beach cannot claim outsider, radical, or rebel status for them by virtue of these authors living, writing, or publishing outside of universities. Beach therefore claims that there is a "mainstream academic poetry" that has "raised a kind of iron curtain" and that certain gifted poets (Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, and others) are among those oppressed. Beach typecasts writing workshops and programs as the bastions of empire: the university, after all, "in fact can serve as a cultural link to the larger interests of the state, and might not survive without that link."

Although Beach's confederates enjoy academic support, too, Beach portrays them as the liberators in an otherwise artless, anti-intellectual, politically passive, and insular network of academic poetry. In many passages, Beach implies that the only daring, wise, relevant, or politically potent poetry is that which, like Lyn Hejinian's, "is informed in part by the theoretical works of such writers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Luce Irigaray." For Beach, "reliance on the theoretical formulations of poststructuralist theory" is one of the distinguishing and enabling powers of Language poetry. Beach champions an academic poetry that is informed, inspired, deciphered, "problematicized," and mediated by academic literary theorists. Extremely challenging, experimental poetry is best explicated, it seems, by some of the most lugubrious circumlocutions ever perpetrated by degreed professionals. How this poetic-theoretical-academic circle of discourse would liberate poetry to reach a broad, inclusive, national audience is a riddle wrapped in an enigma sunk in a quagmire. Nonetheless, it does not stop Beach from criticizing Stephen Dobyns, Mark Doty, and many other poets for writing clearly, as if they meant to be understood without the intervention of professional mediators. No matter—Beach argues that Dobyns, Doty, and their peers remain "centered within a relatively self-contained creative-writing culture that is much less connected to movements and practices in other parts of the world"—as if no one were capable of having a sublime, humane, innovative, egalitarian, or subversive thought without a command of the latest fashions in literary theory.

An exceptional work of high-toned hypocrisy and pseudo-sociology, *Poetic Culture* criticizes "the official verse culture" for having cozy, careerist networks, while the book makes numerous fawning references to one of its general editors, Marjorie Perloff. The book also extols the poets in Beach's own recently published anthology, although Beach ridicules the mutual support of others as "overly commodified and æsthetically stultifying." Beach suggests that Stephen Dobyns, like most "workshop poets," can only make a poetry that aspires to the "status as a consumable object"; and after oversimplifying Dobyns' poetry, Beach attacks Mark Jarman for oversimplifying, in a book review, the poetry of Lyn Hejinian. Few poets affiliated with writing programs, however, go unbesmirched in *Poetic Culture*, especially the poets of *The Morrow Anthology of Modern Poets and New American Poets of the Nineties.* At the close of this book, Beach makes a call for the end of polemics and the politicization of camps of poetry, while, in the preceding 185 pages, he did little else but politicize, oversimplify, and malign the work of over one hundred contemporary poets. In his conclusion, Beach urges that we "celebrate (and reward financially with awards and grants)" poets of his favorite circles. In other words: *let's ridicule shopping for fame and fortune (unless that fame and fortune is for us).* It just goes to prove how far the brand-name thinkers of literary theory will deliver one from the mall-sprawl of the state. Some champions of social equity will remain more equal than others.

4. Can Writing Programs Matter?

Another recent indictment of writing programs appeared in *Profession 1999*, published by the Modern Language Association (MLA). The article, "Creative Writing in the Academy" by David Radavich, could just as well have been titled "Who Killed Writing Programs?" or "Can Writing Programs Matter?" Radavich argues that creative writing programs are self-indulgent businesses inspired by the counterculture of the 1960s and the entrepreneurial avarice of the 1980s. Our programs, he proclaims, have come to be "vilified and rendered in some respects obsolete." Speaking for our entire profession, he concludes "There is no profession for which an MFA or PhD in creative writing provides direct training; to pretend otherwise is to delude ourselves and mislead our students." Where Beach argues that poets with MFAs have too much power, too much cultural capital, and too much control over the venues of publishing, grants, awards, and academic appointments, Radavich argues that MFAs have little hope for advancement in any of these areas.

Recycling the arguments of Epstein, Aldridge, and Gioia, Radavich argues that creative writing programs are artistically solipsistic, crassly commercial, academically feeble, and professionally pointless in an era of crisis, backlash, and imploded markets for publications and tenure-track jobs. Radavich recommends that, in view of this crisis, writers in the academy should earn traditional PhDs and become more like scholars, especially since writers are, in his view, "less than reliable, sometimes troublesome" academic colleagues.

Although Radavich's essay is devoid of original arguments, it contains a few adventures in contradictory reasoning. He argues that creative writing programs encourage students to duplicate solipsistic works for the "university-based subculture"—while creative writing programs also coerce students to write commercially, for "publishing glory" and a wide audience outside of academe. He implies that the "university-based subculture" would be rehabilitated into the culture at large if aspiring writers would study writing "only as a means for personal growth and exploration," and if only they would abandon their ambitions for national acclaim and publication and become well-mannered scholars! If ever there were a prescription to ensure the immolation of literature, this would be it, although it evidently makes sense to the editorial board of the MLA.

Radavich's commentary is misguided and amusing for many other reasons.

First, Radavich assumes that the only appropriate goal of graduate study is to produce tenured professors. How dreary that would be! The goal of graduate study in creative writing is to become, first and foremost, an accomplished writer who makes significant contributions to contemporary literature. All the other goals, like becoming an academic professional, are ancillary to that artistic goal. As in the visual and performing arts, the most gifted professors of writing are those who practice what they teach. The best teachers of the *making* of the arts are those experienced in *making* them; they are not specialists in *studying, preserving*, or *analyzing* the arts, although art programs must include these endeavors, too, in their pedagogy and curriculum. The craft and pedagogy

of writers who teach should be continually honed by their experience as practicing artists. As a result, the studies, work, and temperament of the artist must be addressed to the public and the markets that serve the public. No credential makes one a successful artist; the proof is in the work. If one's art is good, one has earned the privilege to teach others that art. With whom would it be better to study playwriting? With a doctor of literature who has never written a play but has studied many from the 18th century on? Or with the teacher with an MFA in theater who has written dozens of plays and seen many of them through production to public performances? Although the former experience might be useful to a young playwright, the latter experience would probably have more utility towards making a successful play. In engineering, medicine, or computer science, the degreed professionals who actually build bridges, cure the sick, or write software—the practitioners—are the most respected teachers. Only in the departments of English does there remain this peculiar insistence that only the specialists who study, anatomize, deconstruct, or systematically humiliate their subject should be allowed to teach it. The programs of AWP have always maintained that those who make literature actually know something about it.

Second, as in the visual and performing arts, no advanced degree necessarily secures jobs for artists. If you aspire to make art, you mate with uncertainty, and each new effort is your cherished risk. Of course, it's all too hard, too unlikely; that's what makes it great. But how myopic not to see that study in the arts is applicable to many types of employment outside academe!—like those of a professional writer, editor, literary agent, public affairs officer, grant writer, etc. AWP Job List has featured a large number of nonacademic jobs for writers, and graduates of creative writing programs have succeeded in filling them.

Third, if one peruses the MLA's own publications, one will find many polemics on whether or not literary scholarship has grown solipsistic, academically feeble, and professionally pointless in an era of crisis, backlash, and imploded markets for publications and tenure-track jobs. Why, then, does Radavich believe that more scholarly behavior among writers will improve their livelihoods? Like scholars, writers hold positions at all levels of academe, from adjunct to full professor, from demeaning, temporary jobs to the endowed chairs with six-digit salaries.

Fourth, Radavich's prejudice that writers are "colorful, less than reliable, sometimes troublesome" would be comic if it were not so spiteful. Radavich implies that scholars are more earnest and collegial and, one supposes, not so colorful, although this does not resemble the world in which many of us study and work, where faculty members sigh and mutter before the department mail boxes as they collect the latest installment of memos in which some scholars, like some writers, castigate one another over issues of such high principle that no one can verify their relevance to education or literature. (See Richard Russo's fine satire, *Straight Man*, for illustrations of how colorful deans, scholars, and writers can be.)

Fifth, creative writing as an academic discipline has evolved and matured over the past 120 years in order to complement literary scholarship and its pedagogy. For writers to duplicate the work and pedagogical methods of scholars or theorists would be self-

defeating, and bad for a balanced study of literature. The well-rounded department of literature includes temperaments and courses that cultivate theory and practice, cultural preservation and criticism—literary conservation and innovation. Writers, teaching workshops and seminars from a writer's perspective, help to establish this balance.

Sixth, the alumni and teachers of creative writing programs are not part of an insular subculture; they include many of today's most widely read and respected authors. Wally Lamb, who taught creative writing at the University of Connecticut, and Bret Lott, who teaches creative writing at the College of Charleston, both recently appeared on Oprah Winfrey's televised book club. Their novels have become bestsellers. Rita Dove, a former President of AWP, who teaches at the University of Virgina, served as the Poet Laureate of the United States. These are only a few examples among creative writing graduates and professors who write for a large audience, speak on public radio and television, give national reading tours, have their poems turned into popular songs, or have their works made into movies. These writers are "public intellectuals." Few literary scholars and fewer theorists have reached the degree of public stature enjoyed by these writers.

Seventh, the competition in the academic job market has improved the quality of teachers in our programs. Although the job market seems to have enjoyed a slight turn for the better this year, it remains madly competitive. There is a demand for PhDs in composition, but many graduates in both literary scholarship and creative writing must compete for relatively few tenure-track jobs. It does not occur to Radavich that this job market has enabled programs to become extremely selective in their new hires. The programs demand more of their faculty, and their faculty, in turn, demand more of their students. The rigor and quality of artistic education in the programs have improved as a result.

Radavich's essay is only tenuously connected to the actual development, philosophies, and practices of creative writing programs. Radavich guesses that creative writing's "first institutionalization" occurred at Yale around 1914. This was not the case. He claims, too, that "the first wave of creative writers—for instance, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Marge Piercy, and LeRoi Jones" suddenly swept into the academy during the countercultural movement of the 1960s. This, too, is erroneous, among many other imaginative accounts. Rather than unravel all of Radavich's mistaken chronologies and surreal causes and effects, the final sections of this essay provide a separate, abbreviated history of our programs and their reasons for being.

In addition to the documents of AWP, my historical summary relies heavily upon the excellent research and insights of D.G. Myers, whose book, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, is the most thorough analysis of writing programs to date. The book's title alludes to a famous anecdote that illustrates the reluctance of English departments to accept living authors. When Harvard University was about to appoint the novelist Vladimir Nabokov to a chair in literature, the linguist Roman Jakobson remarked, "What's next? Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?"

5. The Ascendancy of Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline

Like the first classes in English composition, the first classes in creative writing were a reaction against the study of literature as most universities practiced it before 1900. After the Civil War, study in the Classics began to be supplanted by the study of philology. Philology was an effort to make literature the subject of a linguistic science; philology sought to define and anatomize literary works for intimations of a culture's meaning and order. Although philology opened academic study to literary works in English, and not just those in Greek and Latin, philology became specialized and limited. With each passing decade, it became more divisive as well.

The founder of *The American Journal of Philology*, Basil Gildersleeve of Johns Hopkins University, codified the practices of "historico-philological science," as he called it. His pronouncements illustrate a rift in academe that remains with us today. Professor Gildersleeve, in the 1920s, divided the study of literature into two camps: the scholars versus the aesthetes—the philologists versus the *littérateurs*. Gildersleeve likened the philologists to botanists; these were the real men of letters, scholars who defined, classified, annotated, and conserved literary wisdom. Those who were interested in studying a poem's music or a novel's aesthetic form—the mere *littérateurs*—Gildersleeve likened to florists.

The phrase "creative writing" was, perhaps, first coined by Emerson in 1837. In his Phi Beta Kappa address "The American Scholar," Emerson referred to "creative writing" and "creative reading" as respites from "the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees." The advocate of a new culture for a new nation, Emerson became a famous detractor of received bodies of knowledge. For Emerson, America's enabling spirit was in its proclivity to add, to test, to revolt, and to innovate. Philology, as it was usually practiced and taught, thwarted these New-World tendencies in an effort to conserve the past. Emily Dickinson, too, would write a poem ("Shall I take thee, the Poet said") that—obliquely, of course—criticizes philology for being spiritually inept.

The first classes in writing were offered by Barrett Wendell at Harvard University in the 1880s, and such classes grew by steady increments thereafter. These early classes were, in part, a revolt against philology. These new classes in writing emphasized practice, æsthetics, personal observation, and creativity rather than theory, history, tradition, and literary conservation. In 1884, Professor Wendell offered his first course in advanced composition. A fusion of the study and practice of journalism, literary techniques, grammar, rhetoric, and æsthetic discernment, Wendell's "educational experiment," as he called it, was daring for its time. It was also wildly popular among students. Despite his requirement that the students submit daily writing exercises, 150 students enrolled for the course the following year. Le Baron Briggs taught, also at Harvard from 1889 to 1925, a class in the history and principles of versification. A former newspaper man, Charles T. Copeland, succeeded Briggs as a professor of creative writing. A few of the students of

these teachers—Wendell, Briggs, and Copeland—would become professors themselves and offer similar classes, and some would become accomplished authors as well.

One of Barrett's former students, William Hughes Mearns, conducted an experiment of his own at a junior high school. Mearns found that "creative writing" was an extremely effective means in motivating students to learn more and to write well. His classes emphasized motivation, active participation, creativity, and self-expression over discipline, historical study, memorization, and drills. Inspired by the progressive educational ideas of John Dewey, Mearns published what was, perhaps, the first anthology of student literary work; and his own books, *Creative Youth* (1925) and *Creative Power* (1929), made "creative writing" a ubiquitous subject of interest among educators and young students.

After the 1920s, philology gave way to various practices of literary criticism that, despite their being various and more concerned with æsthetic discernment, still owed a great deal to philology and Germanic traditions of scholarship (the *wissenschaftlichte Methode*). Literary study continued to be retrospective and scientific in temperament. "We study literature today," Allen Tate remarked, "as if nobody ever again intended to write any more of it. The official academic point of view is that all the literature has been written, and is now a branch of history."

Scholars criticized the study of creative writing in return. Creative writing classes, the scholars argued, showed an immoral disregard for great literary monuments; such classes were too intuitive and naïve at best, and they were irrational and ignorant at worst—occasions for self-indulgence, confessional exhibitionism, etc.—hardly the stuff for the rigors of an academic discipline. At many institutions, scholars resisted and sometimes thwarted the efforts of writers to implement classes and programs in creative writing.

6. Literature as Historical Artifacts and as Works of Art

In 1930, an associate professor from the University of North Carolina, Norman Foerster, became the director of the School of Letters at the University of Iowa. Foerster sought to repair the divorce in the study of literature, the divorce between æsthetics and scholarship, between practice and theory, and between art and criticism. Foerster did not intend for his school to become "a vocational school for authors and critics," but he did implement classes in creative writing and a new emphasis on literature as an art. Like Wendell and the pioneers of creative writing at Harvard, Foerster saw literature as a collection of works of art and also as historical artifacts. In his school, he sought to synthesize the making and study of literature for its beauty, humanism, wisdom, and historical importance. Foerster's graduate school was the first to contain the basic components of today's creative writing programs: a course of study leading to a graduate degree; seminars for writers on the issues of craft and form; the study of literature as an art; and a creative work for a thesis.

The interest in contemporary letters—the teaching of literature as if people still planned to write more of it—gained momentum in the late 1940s and early 1950s as many universities appointed writers as professors or as visiting writers-in-residence. Among some of the earliest were John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt; Yvor Winters at Stanford; Robert Hayden at Fisk; Howard Nemerov and Bernard Malamud at Bennington College; William Faulkner at the University of Virginia; John Ciardi at Harvard and then Rutgers; Kenneth Rexroth at the University of California, Riverside; Theodore Roethke at the University of Washington; Karl Shapiro and John Barth at Johns Hopkins; John Berryman at Minnesota; Richard Hugo at the University of Montana. Literary reviews were also established on campuses: *Southern Review, Kenyon Review, Northwest Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Sewanee Review, New Letters,* and *Ploughshares* among many others.

7. The Emerging Voices of Pluralism and Democracy

The shift in literary culture from one that was mainly retrospective to one that was both retrospective and prospective, both historical and creative, gave many women the inspiration to enter an arena previously closed to them. A number of books on writing by women were published during this time: *Imaginative Writing* (1927) by Adele Bildersee, *Becoming a Writer* (1934) by Dorothea Brande, *So You Want to Write!* (1936) by Esther L. Schwartz, *Do You Want to Write?* (1937) by Margaret Widdemer, and *Help from the Nine Muses* (1938) by Brenda Ueland.

As poet and former AWP president Carolyn Kizer has noted, "Women are custodians of the world's best kept secret: the private lives of one half of humanity." The ascendancy of creative writing helped to cultivate a literature and a humanism that was more inclusive and, finally, more humane, although places for women at the seminar table continued to be few and hard-earned.

In 1942, Paul Engle founded the Iowa Writers' Workshop, an outgrowth of Foerster's School of Letters. Unlike Foerster's graduate program, which was designed to produce well-rounded scholars, Engle's graduate program specialized in the education and nurturing of literary artists—a somewhat different enterprise, but just as important. Engle's program offered a course of study culminating in the Master of the Fine Arts (MFA) degree.

In 1946, Elliott Coleman founded the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University. In 1947, Stanford University and the University of Denver both launched graduate creative writing programs. In 1948, Baxter Hathaway founded the creative writing program at Cornell University. Soon, writing programs could measure their success by the successful authors who graduated from them. At Iowa, Kurt Vonnegut once taught a workshop that included John Casey, Andre Dubus, Gail Godwin, and John Irving. The mentorship, in universities, of writers teaching the next generation of writers propelled American letters

to new levels of accomplishment and helped the United States to produce a literature as powerful and diverse as its people.

At Duke, William Blackburn taught William Styron, Fred Chappell, and Reynolds Price. Price, in turn, taught Josephine Humphries and Anne Tyler. E.L. Doctorow taught Richard Ford at the University of California, Irvine. Donald Dike taught Joyce Carol Oates at Syracuse. Andrew Lytle taught Harry Crews. At Stanford, Wallace Stegner taught Robert Stone, Barry Lopez, Ken Kesey, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Raymond Carver, and many others. Annie Dillard, Madison Smartt Bell, Lee Smith, and Henry Taylor studied at Hollins College. Many winners of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry are also graduates of writing programs: W.D. Snodgrass, Donald Justice, Rita Dove, Henry Taylor, Yusef Komunyakaa, and others. And there are many other examples, as more universities became more successful in helping one generation of writers to educate and encourage the next.

8. The Founding of AWP

Although the Modern Language Association (MLA) was founded in 1883 and its membership soon included thousands of scholars of literature, teachers of creative writing were slow to form full-fledged programs, departments, or an association. Writers in academe were reluctant to professionalize their field, perhaps, because they were somewhat anti-professional at first—at odds with the dominant professional modes of studying and teaching literature. Once creative writing programs were established, however, the writers who taught in them found it necessary to organize their support for one another. They did so to secure their profession's place in academe, to set high standards for their programs, and to create new publishing opportunities for young writers.

AWP was founded in 1967 by the fiction writer R.V. Cassill at Brown University. At the time, the association's nascent membership included only 15 writers representing the programs of 13 universities. The association soon established a myriad of services for writers, teachers, and students: anthologies of student work, a journal, a guide to writing programs, a career placement service, an annual conference, literary competitions, publishing opportunities, awards, and advocacy and technical support for writers who teach. The table below illustrates the growth in the number of programs and AWP's membership.

During the course of the association's growth from just a few programs to over three hundred programs, AWP focused, with increasing frequency, on professional standards and efforts to support a high quality of artistic literary education. AWP published *AWP Guidelines for Creative Writing Programs and Teachers of Creative Writing* in 1979. The document established appropriate class sizes for seminars or workshops in creative writing, and it set policies for the hiring and promotion of writing faculty; the guidelines also established AWP's position that the MFA is the appropriate terminal degree for

writers who teach. In continuing efforts to promote high standards, AWP published *The AWP Hallmarks for a Successful Graduate Program in Creative Writing* in 1996 and then additional hallmarks for undergraduate programs in 1998. The AWP board of directors shaped the hallmarks to facilitate the periodic review and assessments of creative writing programs.

9. An Effective Means to Develop New Audiences for Literature

In 1998, the American Council on Education and the University of California conducted a survey on the habits and aspirations of 275,811 college freshmen entering 469 institutions. The survey found, among other things, that 80.4% of these students had occasionally played a video game in the past year while only 18.7% had frequently checked out a book or journal from a school library. Among their reasons for going to college, the ability to make more money ranked highest among 74.6% of these new college students.

These are troubling indicators to anyone who believes in the arts and scholarship and the humanistic values of higher education. In a culture that keeps accelerating the mind-numbing titillations of its entertainments, scholars and writers must work together to preserve the slow and profound pleasures of books. Classes in creative writing are an excellent means of introducing students to a wider range of intellectual inquiry and humane virtues. As William Hughes Mearns had proven in the 1920s, the practice of writing, poetry, and storytelling can motivate students to levels of intellectual curiosity and accomplishment that may surprise the students themselves as much as the cynics.

10. Creative Writing's Place in Undergraduate Studies

Undergraduate students often make their first enduring connection to literature through contemporary works and creative writing. Creative writing courses enable students to study and appreciate literature as a *living* body of knowledge—one growing and still evolving—one to which they, too, may contribute. This may especially motivate undergraduate students who may, at first, dislike literature as a shop of weird antiques. Through creative writing classes, undergraduates often see new dimensions to the literature of the past by writing their own poems and stories.

As graduate programs in creative writing grew, so did the number of creative writing classes and minor courses of study for undergraduates. These undergraduate workshops differ from graduate workshops because their primary goal is not to educate artists but to teach students critical reading skills, the elements of fiction and verse, general persuasive writing skills, and an appreciation of literary works of the present and past.

Undergraduate courses in creative writing usually include reading assignments and a critical paper or oral presentation, and sometimes recitations and exams. Teachers of undergraduates are keenly aware that, before a student can even pretend to be a writer, that student must become a talented reader of literature. Many papers presented in AWP's Pedagogy Forum address this need of students, although the cynics would prefer to believe that all classes emphasize mere self-expression.

Creative writing classes for undergraduates became among the most popular in the arts and humanities. The commentators argue that the programs are popular because the classes are easy, or because they cater to each successive generation's growing narcissism. AWP argues that programs in creative writing, like other programs in the arts, are popular because they teach, among other important lessons, the efficacy of the human will.

Word by word, line by line, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, students make personal choices in a creative writing class, and each choice makes a difference. The students create worlds of their own making. In a culture where individual acts often seem of little consequence, the will to make art, the will to make a difference, and the experience of having done so is exalting.

A student is unlikely to experience this exaltation in a class tempered by recent literary theories. In their fierce efforts to enforce greater social equity and a more humane culture, professors of literary theory often deprive writers of their humanity. In the application of recent theories, writers become mere unwitting conduits through which society, markets, religion, politics, and prejudices of all kinds—the real authorities—manufacture literary texts. The authors and their overt intentions are less important to consider than the social-political authorities and their covert means of oppression. The application of literary theory often demotes writers—not for what they willed their works to say, but for what they did not will their works to say. The professors of theory remind us that words, after all, are not the things they represent and so are hopelessly inexact and distorted by social powers. Such demotions of authors and language, especially among undergraduates, does not cultivate a keen appreciation of literature. In contrast, creative writing classes have always esteemed, not *texts*, but literary *works*, which writers willed into being because they needed to name an experience or idea their culture had not yet named. When they do succeed in naming something new, we are all the richer for having yet another image, story, song, or character by which we can know our pleasures and predicaments. The teaching of creative writing is the teaching of these appreciations.

Like other lessons of creative writing—in creativity, empathy, persuasive expression, and æsthetic discernment—the artistic experience of the will's efficacy may seem too rarefied a goal for a practical age that prefers to quantify success in patents, cures, sales units, and dollars. But the university that discounts artistic experiences compromises its own powers to educate and serve its students. The experiences of art and the efficacy of one's will are important to all of us and especially to students of ethnic minorities and impoverished families. These students often feel that the world is not theirs, not of their making. When these students enter a classroom where their personal choices are respected, investigated,

and discussed, they may very well enjoy an experience that may enrich their lives forever—and make them feel truly part of the university, its community, and its mission.

11. The Benefits of Creative Writing in Higher Education

For many universities, a writing program is a means to bolster enrollments in many courses in English literature for both undergraduate and graduate students. Colleges of the arts and sciences should develop programs in creative writing for this practical reason and for the high-minded reason that the study of literature is simply incomplete without creative writing, just as the study of creative writing is incomplete without the scholarship and appreciation of the great literature of the past. The literature of the past can seem remote and irrelevant without the controversies of contemporary letters to animate it, just as contemporary letters can be shallow and vain without a knowledge of the older legacies of literature. A truly great university, of course, supports both retrospective and prospective literary endeavors. Great universities support both theory and practice, both scholarship and contemporary letters, both conservation of past works and the innovation of future works.

In summary, higher education's development of creative writing programs have been beneficial to colleges, universities, and our culture in general. A program in creative writing:

• Animates literary study with lively connections to the students' lives, times, and culture and thereby completes literary curriculum by balancing courses of historical study with courses addressed to literature's present and future applications;

• Fosters a study of literature that marries theory and practice, æsthetics and scholarship, literary conservation and innovation;

• Provides courses with effective pedagogical approaches for teachers at all levels of education;

• Advances the ideals of a liberal and humane education by inspiring, exercising, and strengthening the efficacy of the human will to do good, to make a meaningful difference in art and in society;

• Bolsters the enrollments generally, for academically sound reasons, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels;

• Provides undergraduates with additional, effective classes in which they may practice and learn the elements of literature and persuasive writing;

• Improves a department's ability to address the intellectual interests and needs of students—women as well as men—from diverse ethnic heritages, economic classes, and geographical regions;

• Helps to develop and expand future audiences for literature, criticism, and scholarship;

• Supports and advances writers and their contributions to contemporary letters;

• Strengthens the role of academic professionals as public intellectuals;

• Increases a department's ability to attract and enroll the best students;

• Increases a department's ability to recruit, hire, and retain the most accomplished and most diverse faculty;

• Makes significant and enduring contributions to literature through the published works of its faculty and distinguished graduates.

12. Turning the Inside Out

One of the most common charges against creative writing programs is that they are somehow an overbearing but insular entity—a huge monolith or Ivory Tower that stands apart from our general culture. This is somewhat strange since some of the same critics will also talk about the vast numbers of graduate and undergraduate workshops held throughout the country. It's a bit difficult to have "a university-based subculture" when colleges and universities include students of almost every economic class, region, and ethnicity to be found in North America. The public really does attend its public institutions of higher education—the big state universities and the community colleges as well as the private institutions. Those that attend writing classes hardly become hermetically sealed within a separate zone.

My own experiences as a student of creative writing parallel those of many students and graduates of our programs. In the 1970s, I was fortunate enough to attend a small liberal arts college, Colorado College, which had an excellent series of writers visiting its campus. Joseph Brodsky, Robert Hayden, and Alistair Reid especially made large impressions on me. Sometimes I attended literary events at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, where I knew a number of student writers who also attended the readings at my school. We were interested in writing, but we had not been indoctrinated into a academic subculture.

Our interests and influences were diverse: literature from various continents and centuries; comparative mythology and Jung; civil rights and political science; philosophy and Heidegger; the blues, jazz, and idioms of Louisiana; Simone de Beauvoir and feminism; John Muir and ecology of the West and Northwest; etc. Our colleges required

that we study in various disciplines, and we pursued creative writing as a minor emphasis in our major studies of the humanities, arts, or sciences.

Outside of class, we did, however, edit literary journals, and we frequently assaulted a few wonderful and generous teachers with our own stories and poems, even when such works had not been assigned. We could be, from time to time, self-absorbed, self-important little jerks, but I don't think we fit the description of lazy, solipsistic, creative-writing-group-therapy victims whom certain commentators find to be so pandemic. Some of these student writers, naturally, were more talented than others. Among the 20 or so contenders, about seven went on to publish books, and two or three attended graduate programs in creative writing. One of them was a veteran and former war correspondent named Yusef Komunyakaa. He had been awarded the Bronze Star for his military service, and he would eventually be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry.

The few of us who entered graduate schools in creative writing also found varied interests and backgrounds among our classmates. In my graduate workshops, a few of my classmates had already published stories, for thousands of dollars, in slick magazines; a few had published poems in *The New Yorker, The Nation*, and prestigious quarterlies. They were much better writers than I was. Of course, I hated them. I sought to find fault with their work at every opportunity. And then, for a brief, regrettable while, I fell under the spell of certain literary theories. I deposited critiques in workshops that were so deeply informed by the latest philosophical, linguistic, psychological, and political discourse that even I had no idea what I was saying (especially since, as Lacan suggests, every poem has its Freudian navel—that point at which a dream, poem, or critique transgresses its own limits and necessitates the dreaming—*sous rature*!—of a new dream, poem, or critique, so that the dreamer may avoid being merely dreamt, a mirror of the past, for to be merely spoken rather than speaking is to become a Nietzchean diminshed thing, objectified and terminal in its utterance; so one must write and dream toward the omphalos or the umbilicus of maternal nurturing and Heideggerian Dasein, *building*, and *gathering* rather than the staid being of engraved writing and the commandments of the Father that only trace the finished and departed acts of (de)composition like a tombstone…).

Like most students in workshops, I sometimes thought my classmates were writing about the wrong subjects in the wrong style for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. I wondered, too, if perhaps one or two of them should be incarcerated for their own protection. These workshops were not cozy circles of over-encouragement or mere self-expression. We were competitive, supportive, cruel, generous, critical, and tender about one another's work. We wrote and submitted our work to publishers. We read literature and whatever else fueled our writing. Some of us taught, too, as teaching assistants, and we tried to inspire in our students our enthusiasm for books. Our discontents were huge; we wanted more; we wanted better work from ourselves, from our teachers, from our students, and from our peers; we wanted a bigger and better audience; we wanted to turn the whole endeavor inside-out.

At the Library of Congress a few months ago, I heard Robert Pinsky read from *Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology*, a selection of poems and letters edited by Pinsky and Maggie Dietz. As Poet Laureate, Pinsky had requested that Americans write to him to recommend their favorite poems and explain why those works were their favorites. Poems were extolled by people from all walks of life: from Vermillion, South Dakota; Corpus Christi, Texas; Toledo, Oregon; Coral Gables, Florida—people from small towns, big towns, and no towns at all. The reading at the Library of Congress celebrated the publication of the book.

Before reading a favorite poem, Pinsky would read the letter of the person who had recommended it. During the reading, I sat next to one of the people whose letter appears, I learned then, in the anthology. The director of a philanthropic foundation in Virginia, this man had also studied creative writing. He heard his letter read to the audience: "I served in Vietnam with a United States Air Force tactical unit in 1965 and again in Saigon in '71. For years I could not face the Memorial 'Wall.' This poem opened my emotions, and I always think of it when I visit the wall."

His favorite poem was "Facing It," by Yusef Komunyakaa. Pinsky read the poem. The former Air Force pilot's eyes brimmed over just slightly. The experiences of a black man who had grown up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, had come to represent the experiences of a white man from Gainesville, Virginia. The poem had crossed lines of regions, class, cultures, and race to name some part of this man's life that had not been named before, not by himself, not by his leaders, not by movies or TV, not by his friends or family.

In the scale of major cultural events, this was a small triumph of literature and education, but it is a triumph being replicated in millions of different ways in libraries, homes, schools, bookstores, and wherever someone opens a book or tells a story. The minute episodes of such moments make links of experience, time to time, place to place, person to person, until that network is vast, public, and profound. If this is a subculture, according to some, it has a huge embrace. It represents the best of our republic and our best work as teachers, writers, readers, and people.

AWP

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